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**“At school I am just like
everyone else”: Teenage
pregnancy, schooling and
educational outcomes.**

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In this conference paper we present conceptual musings and a reading of data from a project on young people, pregnant and parenting, and their engagement with formal schooling. We have been interviewing parenting students since 2002 whenever we can grab little bites of time and money and, as a result, this has become a project of 'endless beginnings'.

Specifically, this paper focuses on the educational life of one young woman who remained at school during her pregnancy as a 15 year-old and who, as a teen parent, completed her secondary schooling in a mainstream setting. We have compiled this story from four interviews conducted with Julia over the last two years. This longitudinal data has enabled us to distil some themes about Julia and schooling in the following representation.

For the research team, this longitudinal story stays relevant and interesting because of the debates it has prompted (Harrison, Angwin & Shacklock 2002) and due to the way it has informed our continuing research into the educational participation of teen parents in other settings (Harrison, Shacklock, Kamp & Angwin 2004). It is a story about difference and identity and learning from the margins. Understanding this educational life is about *same-yet-different* tensions experienced by teen mothers in regular schooling (Kelly 2000) and about the *self-making and being made* contradictions that such marginal participation invokes and demands (Luttrell 2003).

Julia completed Year 10 as a pregnant teenager in December 2001 and her baby, Kaz, was born in January during the summer vacation and she returned to school as a mum at the start of the new school year in February. Two years on Julia completed her VCE (Year 11 & 12) studies at the same school. Julia and her boyfriend Leon – a full time VCE student at another school - lived with her parents and her five siblings, the youngest of whom was three when Kaz was born, until they had both completed their final year at school. Post Year 12 finds Julia, Leon and Kaz (now 2.5 years old) in a house of their own with Julia combining part-time work and TAFE Certificate studies and Leon an apprentice mechanic with a car manufacturer, doing trade school.

Our construction of difference and identity for Julia builds on three distinct storylines. Firstly, there is a storyline about teenage pregnancy-parenting. It tells about Julia, Leon, her family and their relationships, about the birth of Kaz, and about the contested social terrain of being a teenage parent sometimes called the shame, blame and stigma wars where “a contest is waged among those who continue to believe that adolescent pregnancy should be stigmatised as a deterrent to early sexual activity and welfare dependence, and those with rival interpretations of the meaning of teen pregnancy and motherhood” (Kelly 2000, p.67). Secondly, there is a storyline about schooling. This tells about relationships with teachers, about sensitive and sensible supports for students “coping with the dilemmas of difference” (Kelly 2000, p. 91) and the rigours of learning at regular school as a parenting student. Finally, there is a multidimensional storyline about identity. In this we see how Julia works courageously – and reflexively (Giddens 1991) - at putting together a secure identity around being a teenager, a mum and a student. It is the second of these identity narratives – the learning from the margins story - that we will focus upon in this paper.

Kelly (2000) quotes Minow (1984) in describing the dilemma of difference as “the risk of reiterating the stigma associated with assigned difference either by focussing on it or by ignoring it” (p.6). This risk exists for both Julia and her school and they respectively manage it by dancing around the dilemma. We see the school offer support to Julia as a pregnant and parenting student but it extends only so far and in certain directions. There is counselling and support from individual teachers who take an interest and offer ‘to be there’. Informal support with learning and assessment does exist with a few teachers willing to ‘cut some slack’ but this does not translate into recognition that schedules and patterns of participation may be inappropriate for a pregnant and parenting student. This is too difficult because “the organising principles of regular schooling” (Kelly 2000, p.21) work against this happening. Julia’s dance with the dilemma is reflected in her desire to try to fit in at school, by not looking different from the others, so as not to draw attention to herself: “... everyone told me I could wear casuals to school and stuff but I thought I would get zoned out as a different person so I wore the school uniform and wore extra big clothes right up until the last day”.

The school supports Julia as *a student different to the rest*, that is as a young parent, by permitting her, for example, to bring Kaz to Year 11 camp and to wear casual clothes when she was pregnant but it struggled to build from this to the next stage of supporting her as *a student just like all the rest*. To do this required recognition that Julia had the same desire for learning and school success as other students but that this desire was translated into practice through different life circumstances. She says: “I sort of don’t want to be classed as different. Like I don’t want other people to sort of not like me because of that. Not sort of not like, but saying “I have to have some friends, people”. While the school is good at providing personal support, it cannot provide educational support through additional (or extended) opportunities to do work missed and to complete and hand-up work on different time-lines. This is crucial because it lies at the heart of taking responsibility for ensuring success as opposed to fiddling around the edges and hoping that Julia can marshal the stamina and personal resources to cope like ‘any other’ student. For teen parents this is what Kelly (2000) has described as the politics of inclusive schooling. This *same-yet-different* tension is the dilemma of difference working in both visible and invisible ways through assumptions and practices. We see it at work in various instances, such as teachers encouraging Julia to bring Kaz to school but suggesting she stay (and play) in an office so as not to disrupt their teaching.

It is likely that systemic constraints and rules imposed upon the school from outside do work against educational supports of the kind stated above from happening. That the school cannot (or will not) respond in this way leads to Julia dropping a subject, not going to camp, missing classes and not handing-in worksheets and so on. Ultimately, this is unsatisfactory because Julia’s educational experience is diminished because it is not the same in fundamental ways. Whether intended or not, or explicitly stated or not, both Julia and the school operate from an expectation that she needs to conduct her participation in learning *as if she was not pregnant or parenting*. This is an ontological contradiction and sets up the conditions for failure, the consequences of which must be borne by Julia alone – in her words “if I don’t do it, I reckon it’s me personally”.

In Luttrell's (2003) analysis of pregnant and mothering teens' self-representations, she identifies examples of "identificatory struggles and splitting of self- and identity-making" (p.141). We see this in Julia's explanation dropping a class because she could not cope with the learning demands of the subject's workload despite poor attendance from being tired and sickness. This may be read as an identificatory struggle when positioned alongside an expectation of meeting the work requirements in the same way as would her peers: "I don't want to be zoned out as a person that gets special treatment 'cause I've got a baby and everything 'cause I think that's unfair for the rest of the students". Being able to rationalise non-participation or non-completion in ways that do not challenge the support provided by the school, or her own competency as a 'good' parent are further instances of splitting of self-identity. This inevitably led her to position herself as deficit, or lacking capacity in some way - such as, it is because *I am too tired, I cannot cope, or I cannot be bothered*. Julia appears caught on the horns of the dilemma of difference.

Julia's persistent recounting of the theme that the school and the teachers had been really supportive was the base in which her ownership of failure to cope with the educational demands was grounded. Not only did it allow her to accept missing out on things but it repeatedly positioned the demands that she could not meet as reasonable - and so her incapacity to cope was entirely her own doing. As she put it: "I think it's more [a] personal, can't be bothered ... don't want to do it sort of thing, if I don't hand it [in] ... it's like it's not because of Kaz if I don't get it in". In simultaneously accepting educational failure and denying the influence of parental responsibility, Julia's identity as a successful student is *being made*, or more precisely unmade, by the organising principles of schooling.

In summary, our discussions of Julia's story about identity, difference and participation in schooling as a pregnant and parenting teenager reveal four themes that need to be addressed both methodologically and theoretically in this kind of research.

- We need to find respectful ways to access and describe the lived experience of students who are different but desire and/or choose to construct and be perceived as the same that do not trivialize the complexity of reflexive identity

formation.

- The role of class and culture in the self-making and othering of pregnant and parenting students through social, educational and media-driven shame, blame and stigma wars.
- Representation of identificatory struggles is central in making visible the complex interplay of loss, responsibility and growing-up in the narratives of pregnant and parenting students.
- We need to introduce difference as a conceptual lens for close examination of the role of the 'organising principles of regular schooling' in 'making' students on the margins.

These themes demand attention if the voices of pregnant and parenting students are to be honoured and those school practices that push them to the margins as learners are to be challenged.

References

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